

Improving Relations with Citizens and the Media

Jihlava, Czech Republic

Background

The problems of citizen apathy and mistrust of local government are widespread in the region. To counteract these problems, Czech government officials sought to improve relations between local governments, citizens, and the media by enhancing citizen participation in areas such as capital budgeting, increasing the exchange of information between the city and its citizens, and improving service delivery. More than 70 cities applied to participate in this demonstration, which was first implemented in the City of Jihlava (population 56,000) in August 1995.

Innovation

The innovative practice involves a comprehensive and systematic approach to improving citizen/media/government relations. To begin, Jihlava municipal officials formed a diverse Project Advisory Committee (PAC), which conducted surveys of the government's view of citizens and citizens' views of government. The PAC developed an action plan based on the survey results. The PAC involved the Mayor and Vice-Mayors in implementing the action plan and recruited media representatives and private citizens to serve on the PAC.

This innovation built consensus for change and undertook concrete, sustainable activities to improve citizen relations. Jihlava held town meetings, established a press office, prepared a citizen information brochure, initiated a weekly radio call-in show, established a task force to review city procedures for funding non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and established an annual "Jihlava Day" to increase civic pride. The town is in the process of establishing town awards for outstanding citizens and evaluation and reward systems for employees.

The innovative practice required 8–12 months to implement with very little direct cost and no legal/regulatory changes required, although some may be recommended as a result of the innovation. Existing town hall staff are implementing most of the project activities, although some additional part-time staff will be hired to act as citizen liaisons and volunteer coordinators. The cost to Jihlava of implementing the innovation is approximately \$30,000.

Results

Jihlava has begun to work with the community to plan municipal improvements, such as a town park. The town plans on conducting a follow-up citizen survey to assess the usefulness of its citizen relations practices. Jihlava is holding more press conferences and thinking strategically about providing information to the public. This innovation has increased community awareness of the importance of citizen relations in daily decision-making in Jihlava and neighboring cities that have emulated Jihlava's actions. The Town of Havlickuv Brod announced that it would establish a press office the week after Jihlava created its office, and many mayors from the area have appeared on Jihlava's radio call-in show. The media has reported that communication with Jihlava's town government has improved significantly.

The innovative practice's comprehensive approach to citizen/government relations can have meaningful, long-term impacts in cities throughout the NIS and CEE. The success of this approach requires that government leaders recognize the importance of citizen relations, make the effort to enhance these relations, and make changes in the way they conduct their affairs.

Summary

To improve its relations with citizens and the media, the City of Jihlava formed a Project Advisory Committee (PAC). The PAC has developed a plan to promote citizen participation, provide increased information to the public through the media, and improve service delivery and internal city management. The PAC's efforts have increased government awareness of the importance of citizen relations in daily decision-making and have resulted in better communication with the media.

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